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ABSTRACT

A young Spanish woman was given 82 hours of individual instruction in English. Her exposure to and use of English were confined to these lessons. The subject acquired adjective-noun ordering and regular plural relatively quickly; possessor-possessed ordering and genitive relatively slowly; the definite article all at once after a period of omitting it; and third person "s" not at all. An analysis of the results indicates: (1) the importance of frequency in acquisition; (2) poorer performance when novel word combinations are attempted; (3) the unhelpfulness of the competence-performance distinction in the description of learners' language; (4) the strength of interference even when error-free learning has taken place; (5) the interaction of various factors in the production of individual errors, which typical cross-sectional data would be unlikely to reveal; and (6) support for the notion that all untutored learners of a language will in the early stages pidginize it in order to communicate. Data are graphically presented. (Author/JB)

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Aspects of a Spanish adult's acquisition of English[1]

The name of the Spanish adult was Blanca. When the study on which this paper reports began, Blanca, a native of Leon but living in Barcelona, was twenty-five. She knew no foreign language at all, but wanted to learn English because her sister had just married an Englishman. She knew some Catalan (rather more, I think, than I was first led to believe), but I do not think that this affected materially her learning of the elements of English which are to be discussed here.

Between January and July 1973 I met her in either her flat or mine in Barcelona 93 times, the sessions totalling 82 hours, with a median length of approximately 40 minutes. She signed a contract not to speak, listen to, read or write English except in my presence for six months. In this way, and by tape-recording all the sessions, I was able to obtain, at least on the surface, a complete record of her learning over that period. I would know everything that was said to her, as well as everything that she said. I would be able to see when a form occurred, whether it had occurred before, and, if so, when, and with what frequency. It also meant, I imagined, that I would be able to observe changes in her English taking place, and not simply have to infer that a change had taken place between two samples. It was for the sake of completeness that the study was carried out in Spain, rather than being based on the acquisition of English by an immigrant to Britain, where it would have been impossible to maintain the necessary control.

I did not attempt to <u>teach</u> Blanca English. I simply spoke to her, basing the language I used on what was then known about the speech

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of parents to young children (Ervin Tripp (1971) and Snow (1972)). I began with short, simple, grammatical sentences, amongst which were many questions and commands. Even if I had not intended to make her linguistic input as far as possible like that to a child, in order to communicate with her, to have her understand me, I should have had to use similar (though perhaps not grammatical) language. I did not tell her that any of her utterances were erroneous. I often expanded or corrected what she said, but without deliberately stressing the element concerned. I used no Spanish at all. We began in effect by playing games, and looking through magazines and a scrap book she compiled. Following my instructions she cooked and ate some rather leathery pancakes, poured me drinks and performed various household tasks. We talked about likes and dislikes; she told me what she had done since I had last seen her and what she planned to do in the future. At the end of six months (82 hours of conversation) her English, though limited in scope and quite idiosyncratic, was fairly fluent and relatively unmarked, I thought, by the influence of Spanish.

I should like to turn now to consideration of the data obtained in this way. In the corpus are nice examples of learners' errors. Some are like those of children acquiring English as their first language: mens instead of men; womens instead of women; book instead of books; green book instead of the green book; Juan parents instead of Juan's parents; I going instead of I'm going; this a book instead of this is a book. Other errors, however, show the influence of Spanish: bedroom Marta instead of Marta's bedroom; sweater red instead of red sweater. There are also oddities like: he doing is swimming instead of he is swimming. But the real benefit of keeping a complete record is not to collect and classify errors, but to look in detail at

some specific features of English and to see what part the errors I have mentioned and others play in the acquisition of these features. This is what I propose to do now, looking first at adjective-noun (A-N) ordering in comparison with possessor-possessed (P-P) ordering, then at the regular marking of plural as against the marking of the genitive and of the third person singular. Finally, very briefly, I shall say something about her acquisition of the definite article. If the transcripts of the sessions with Blanca are seen as a possible rich source of information about second language acquisition, ther this paper can be thought of as a report on a small number of exploratory bore holes which may indicate whether large scale mining would be a worthwhile enterprise.

On the basis of contrastive analysis, invoking the notion of interference, we would predict that both A-N and P-P structures should prove difficult for the Spanish learner of English. In Spanish, with very few exceptions, the adjective follows the noun: the green book; el libro verde. Possession, too, is marked by a different order from English: my mother's house; la casa de mi madre. At the time the study began contrastive analysis was under attack, in part because of its association with a habit theory of learning. Certain writers (Newmark and Reibel (1968)) went as far as to say that what was called "interference" was no more than the learner's attempts to say more than he had yet learned to say in the new language. The problem of "interference" reduced, they claimed, to the problem of ignorance. It was unnecessary to hypothesise 'competing linguistic systems getting in each other's way or taking pot shots at one another'.

It is interesting to see what happened in Blanca's case. What is reported refers to the first 64 sessions, covering 46 hours.

In that period there were 359 utterances containing the A-N construction: 235 were imitations; 124 were spontaneous.[2] In imitations the order was always correct, while in spontaneous utterances there were 11 errors of order. By comparison, there were 161 utterances containing the P-P construction: 80 were imitations; 81 were spontaneous. In imitations again order was always correct, but in spontaneous utterances there were 26 errors of order. If we set a criterion for "acquisition" (and doubts about what this means will be expressed later) as at least 90% accuracy over at least 20 responses,[3] then A-N (Fig 1) reaches this level immediately during the first hour, with no errors, and after only 11 imitations. P-P (Fig 2), on the other hand, reaches criterion only after 32 hours, in which there were 40 spontaneous utterances (including 22 errors of order) and 55 imitations.

Why is there this difference? Why is A-N ordering acquired apparently so much more easily? Part of the answer, at least, seems to lie with FREQUENCY. The frequency of Blanca's utterances containing the relevant constructions is displayed histogrammatically in Figs 1 and 2. Because of games I played with Blanca in the earlier sessions, using objects of various colours and sizes, A-N constructions were extremely frequent, not only in Blanca's speech but also in mine - and learning was rapid. P-P constructions, however, were most infrequent until the time immediately before criterion was reached. Until then, in 24 hours, there had been 10 spontaneous P-P constructions and 28 imitations; in the following 9 hours, during which there is a rise from 13% accuracy to 90%, there are 49 spontaneous P-P constructions and 34 imitations.

That frequency of use should appear to be an important factor in acquiring control of elements of a second language ought not to be

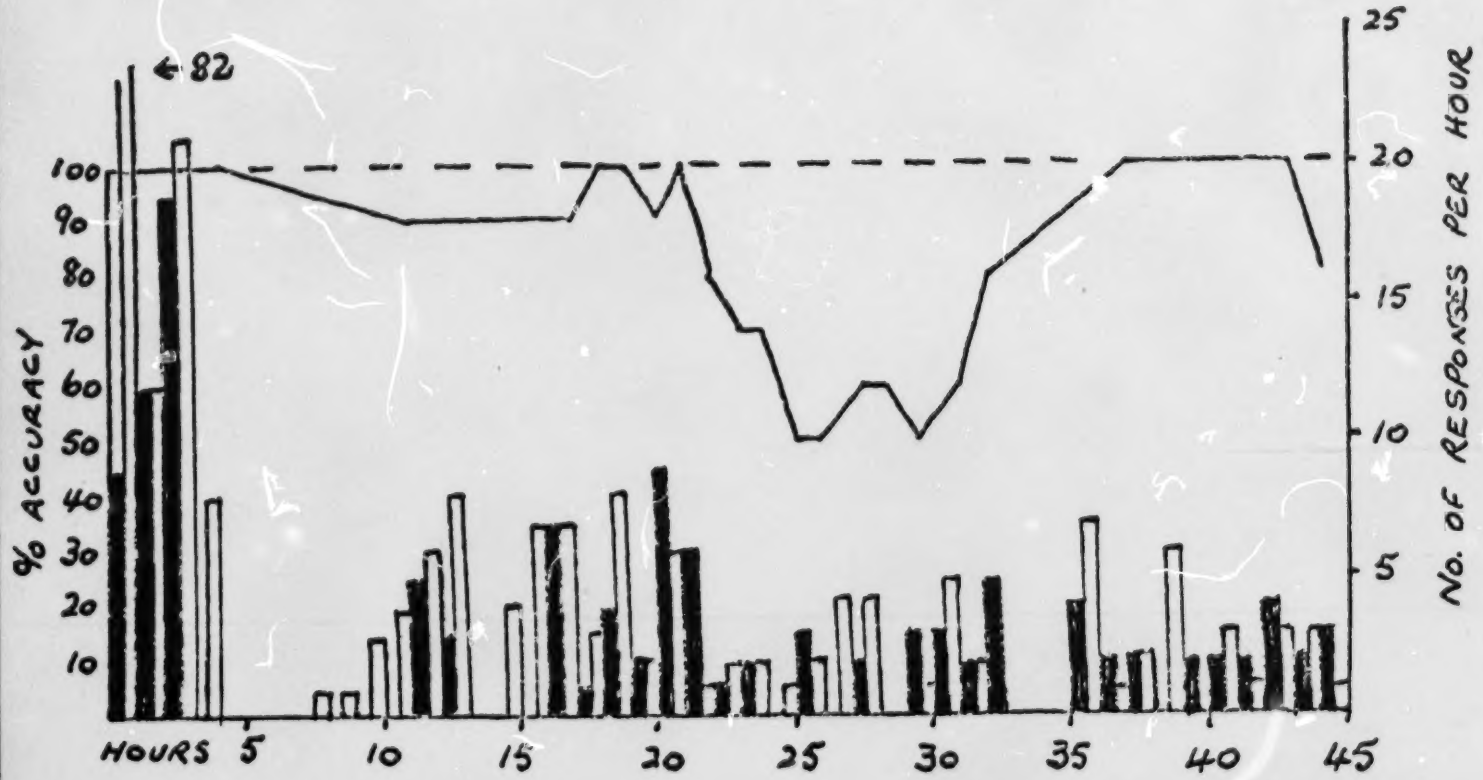

FIGURE 1 : ADJECTIVE - NOUN ORDERING

——— % CORRECT, SPONTANEOUS
– – – % CORRECT, IMITATIONS
▮ No. SPONTANEOUS
▯ No. IMITATIONS

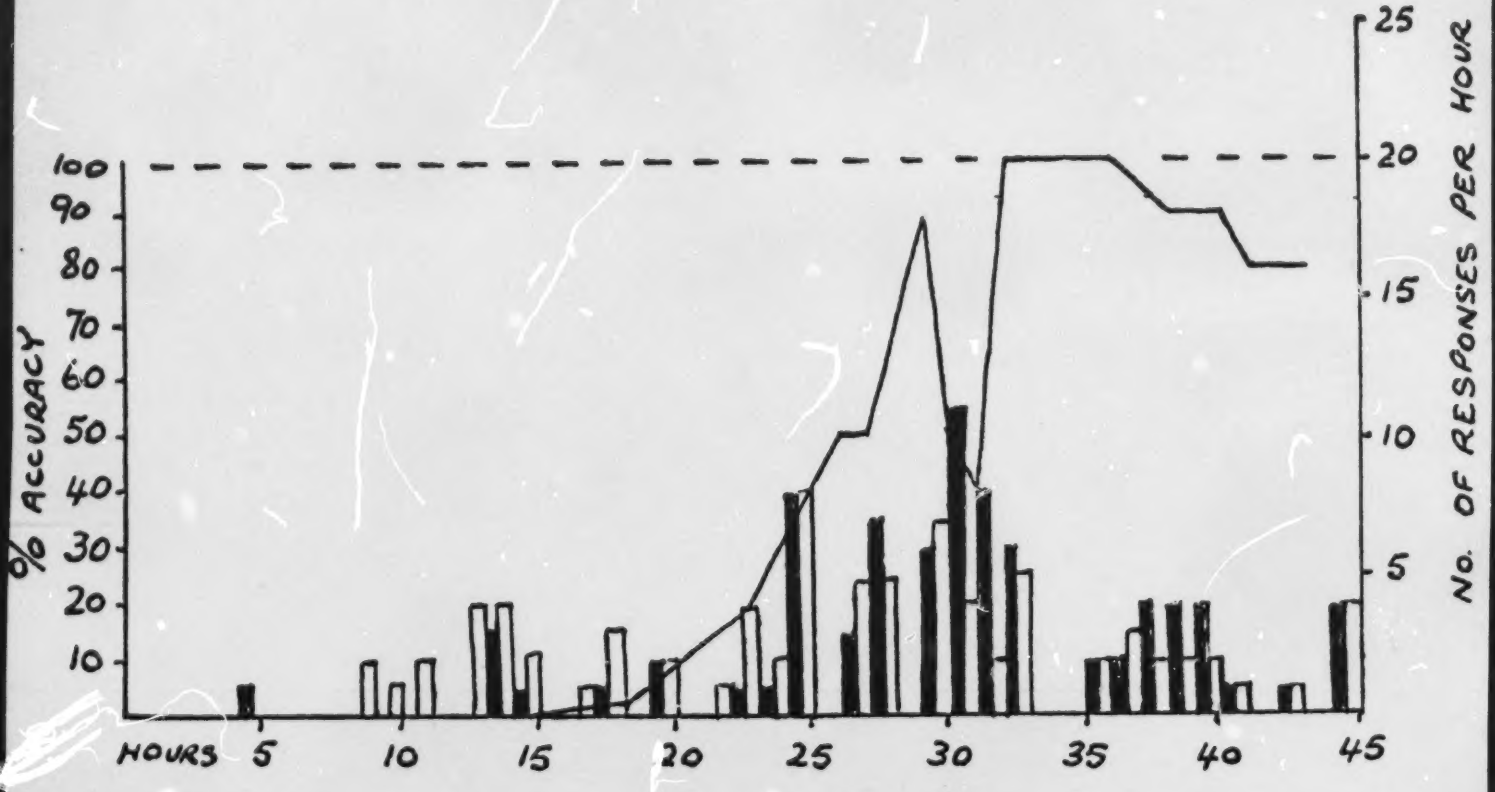

FIGURE 2 : POSSESSOR - POSSESSED ORDERING

——— % CORRECT, SPONTANEOUS

– – – % CORRECT, IMITATIONS

▮ No. SPONTANEOUS

▯ No. IMITATIONS

surprising. If the frequency of structures in the learner's speech is positively correlated with the frequency of those structures in speech to the learner, then we already have some evidence (as opposed to a commonsense assumption) of the importance of frequency. Hatch (1974), looking at the acquisition of English by a Chinese boy, reports that the frequency of various question types in speech to the child was largely matched by their order of acquisition by the child. And when Larsen-Freeman (1976) compared the order of acquisition of various English morphemes by groups of foreign learners in three studies (her own (1976), Dulay and Burt (1974) and Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1974)) with the frequency of these morphemes in the speech of the parents of Adam, Eve and Sarah to their children (Brown (1973)), she obtained correlations of 0.80, 0.93 (for her own group at two times), 0.87 and 0.79. While, as I said above, the apparent importance of frequency in language acquisition should not be surprising, its demonstration might be thought to undermine somewhat the position of those who would argue that consistency of order of acquisition of a number of English morphemes by learners of various linguistic backgrounds is evidence of universal language learning strategies.[4]

When we look closely at the errors that Blanca makes, we discover something interesting. If we call NOVEL those pairs of words entering into A-N and P-P constructions which she has not uttered together in these constructions before, we find that for A-N, out of a total of 11 errors, 8 occurred in novel combinations (of which there were 29). For P-P, 15 out of the total of 26 errors occurred in novel combinations (of which there were 23). If in fact there were no successful novel combinations, we should be inclined to think that something like rote learning had taken place; yet even after criterion is reached there are

5 correct novel P-Ps and 21 correct novel A-Ns. What then has been learned, and how are we to characterise Blanca's English?

It has been suggested by Corder (1973) that, following Chomsky, we should make use of the learner's intuitions to ascertain the state of his grammar at any point. The learner will think that he is making judgements about the target language, but in fact he will be telling us about his own interlanguage. After 18½ hours I sought Blanca's intuitions about 15 pairs of sentences. One of each pair contained an error and was based on a previous deviant utterance of hers; the other was its equivalent in correct English. She was asked to say which of the two sentences was "better". Among the pairs were: I am Marta's mother and I am mother Marta. She unhesitatingly chose the first, the correct form. But this was when, out of six attempts, she had not spontaneously produced the correct P-P order once; and it was a further 6½ hours and 8 attempts before she did so. What use can we make of this information in describing Blanca's English at this stage? It ought to be said that her success in choosing the correct form was not an isolated case. Of the 15 pairs of sentences presented to her, each related to a different error, she failed to understand one, and of the remaining 14 chose the correct sentence 11 times. Only three hours (of English) earlier she had been presented with all 30 sentences singly in random order (with the provision that no members of a pair should adjoin each other). She was asked to say for each sentence whether it was correct English or not. Of the 11 sentences which she later rejected when they were presented as members of pairs, she accepted 10 as correct when they were presented singly. What does this mean? It means simply, I think, - and this should be no surprise - that a learner performs with different degrees of success on different tasks. To judge individual sentences,

to judge pairs of sentences, to produce appropriate utterances including familiar combinations of words, to produce similar utterances with novel combinations of words - each of these is a different task on which a learner may be expected to achieve different levels of success. There is no reason to think that performance on any one task will give us a special insight into "the learner's language", into what might be called his competence. Indeed it is difficult to see how the notion of competence can be of use in studies of this kind. If the concept is helpful in relation to native speakers' language, it is only because native speaker performance on and between various linguistic tasks is relatively consistent;[5] where, as with the learner, there is great variability in performance both within and between tasks, it is surely of no help to choose some part of the learner's performance on one of these tasks and say that this is the true reflection of his competence, regarding all failures to achieve this standard both in this particular task and in other related tasks as mere performance slips. In Blanca's case this would presumably mean saying that correct P-P ordering was part of her English competence at the time of the pairs judgement task, even though it would be some time before the correct form appeared for the first time in her spontaneous speech. This seems somewhat absurd. Even if we were to speak of competence and performance in relation to just one task, let us say in spontaneous speech, it is not obvious how a person's competence would be ascertained. If the correct form appeared just once, would we recognise it as representing the learner's competence, regarding all erroneous forms as slips? This seems hardly better. Alternatively, we might (as we have been exhorted to) describe the learner's language, his "interlanguage", in terms of itself rather than in terms of the degree to which it fails to match the

patterns of the target language. In this case it would presumably be necessary to think of a preponderance of similar erroneous forms as representing the learner's competence, the occurrence of a correct form being thought of as a slip. This would mean that the more slips the learner made, the better would be his performance in the language he was learning. At some point in his progress it would presumably be necessary to claim the correct forms (hitherto slips) as representatives of his competence, and treat the incorrect forms as slips. That we could be led to consider such a nonsense merely underlines the inappropriateness of the concept of competence in describing the learner's language. What we are really interested in is the accuracy with which the learner performs various tasks at various times, the ways in which his performance differs from that of native speakers, and the relationships between his performance on different tasks. To do this we have no need at all for such a distinction between competence and performance.[6] When, as above, a criterion is set for "acquisition" of a structure, no claim is being made about a qualitative change in the learner's command of the language; its function is simply to provide a measure of achievement which will facilitate comparisons.

Despite Blanca's errors in A-N and P-P ordering, I have found nothing in the literature which points to errors of this kind being at all common amongst Spanish learners of English. Indeed, Dulay and Burt (1973), eliciting utterances from 145 Spanish speaking children learning English, and looking for just these sorts of error, found only one amongst 388 errors. Unfortunately they do not say how many equivalent correct forms they obtained. But errors of this kind do occur in the present study, and their appearance seems to be associated with infrequency of use and the novelty of the word combinations involved.

While perhaps the earliest errors in P-P constructions might be thought to result from ignorance (as Newmark and Reibel suggest) it is hard to view A-N errors and later P-P errors, particularly those which did not involve novel combinations, as anything but the result of interference.

I shall now turn to regular plural marking, the genitive, and third person s, which share the allomorphs /s/, /z/ and /iz/. With regard to the acquisition of these by foreign learners, there is much more to be found in the literature. Where the English of groups of Spanish learners (and in fact groups of learners of varied linguistic backgrounds) has been observed, the plural marker has generally been present where required at higher levels than the genitive.[7] On the basis of such results it has been claimed that regular plural is acquired before genitive. This is certainly true for Blanca. For Plural (Fig 3) criterion is reached and maintained after 9 hours (interestingly, it is just when plural reaches 100% that the forms mens and womens appear). By comparison, Genitive (Fig 4) may have reached criterion after 40 hours. Here again frequency seems to play a part. Plural is required more often than genitive (for genitive I have only counted those utterances of Blanca where P-P is correctly ordered).

Although groups of learners of backgrounds other than Spanish also seem to perform better with plurals than with genitives, it is interesting to note in the literature that the gap between performance on plurals and genitives tends to be greater for Spanish speakers than for other groups. What may well be involved here is positive transfer from Spanish, where plural is marked in a very similar fashion to English. This is supported by the evidence of Schumann's (1976) Alberto, a 33 year old Puerto Rican, who after ten months of contact with English

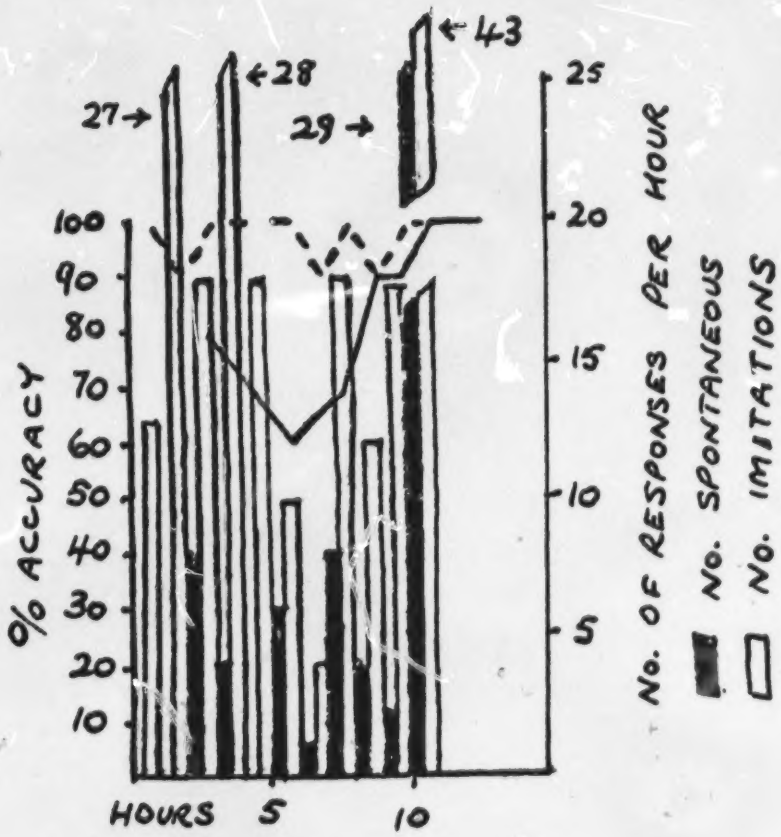

FIGURE 3: REGULAR PLURAL MARKING

—— % CORRECT, SPONTANEOUS
--- % CORRECT, IMITATIONS

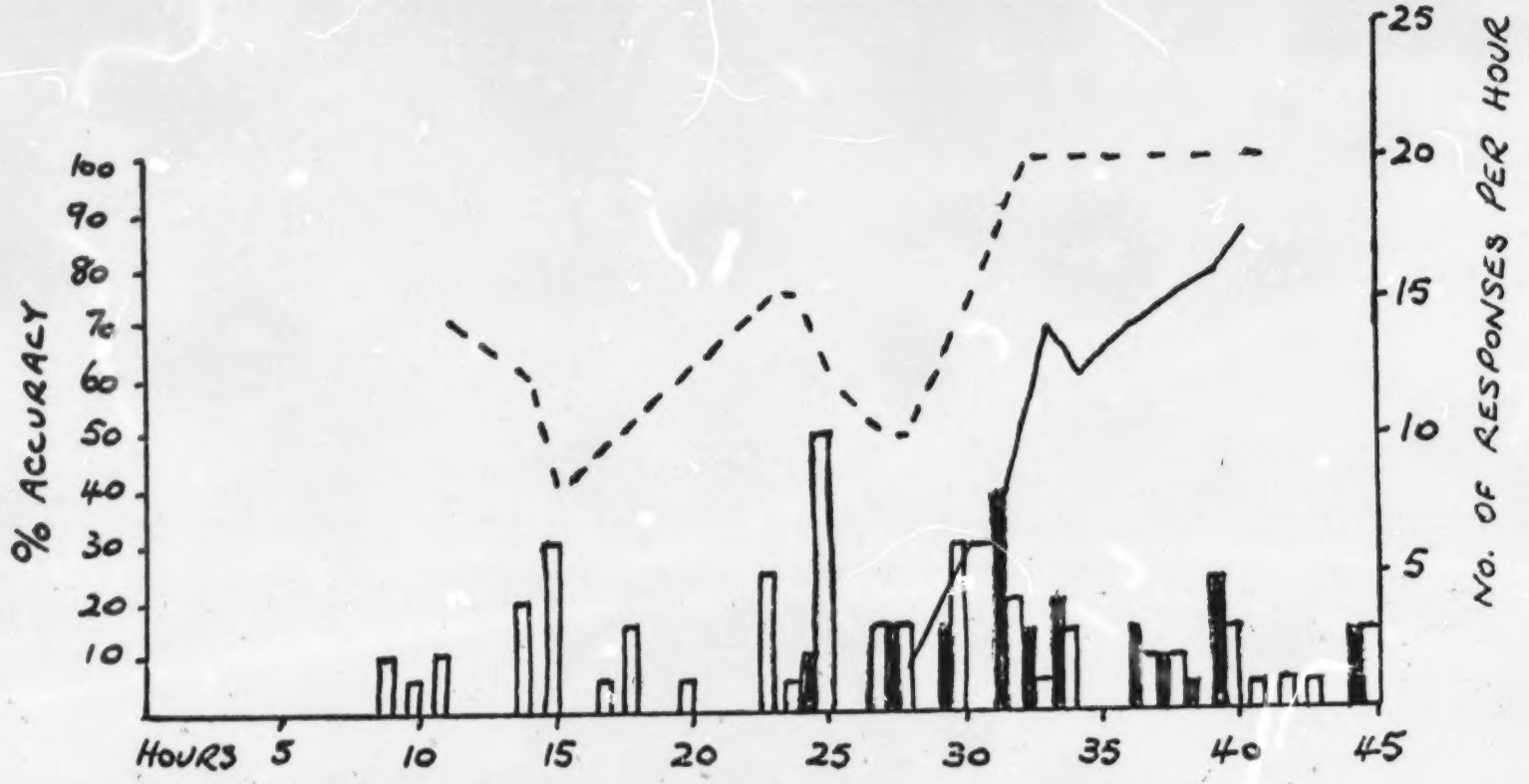

FIGURE 4 : GENITIVE S

—— % ACCURATE, SPONTANEOUS

- - - % ACCURATE, IMITATION

▮ No. SPONTANEOUS

▯ No. IMITATIONS

had made almost no progress in the language, but who nevertheless at the end of the period supplied regular marking in 85% of the cases where it was required.

At the same time, we know that not all foreign learners acquire plural before genitive. Hakuta's (1973) five year old Japanese girl did not. In Japanese plural is not marked, while possession is marked by the same ordering as in English, with the particle no postposed to the first noun. Evidently naturally greater frequency (at least, regular plural was more frequent than genitive in the speech of the Brown parents to their children) is not always sufficient to overcome transfer effects.

If we look at Fig 5 we see that third person s is not acquired, and again frequency seems to be a relevant factor. The morpheme is hardly present until there is an increase in frequency over a relatively short period of time. As performance improves, it is possible to see in the transcripts the effect of another factor. During this period, if I ask Blanca: 'Does Juan drink whisky?' she is less likely to include third person s (Blanca: 'Yes, Juan drink whisky') than if she is responding to my 'I drink whisky' (Blanca: 'and Juan drinks whisky'). The explanation for this seems to lie in a notable speaking strategy of Blanca, which was, in responding to me, to use as large an uninterrupted stretch of my utterance (particularly the end of the utterance) as possible. Thus: 'Does (Juan drink whisky)'. This strategy was most striking when she answered questions of the kind: 'what is he doing?' with 'He doing is swimming'. If this strategy is not limited to Blanca, and I am confident that it is not, then it must bring into question the dependability of results obtained in various experiments using comparable elicitation techniques (including many morpheme acquisition

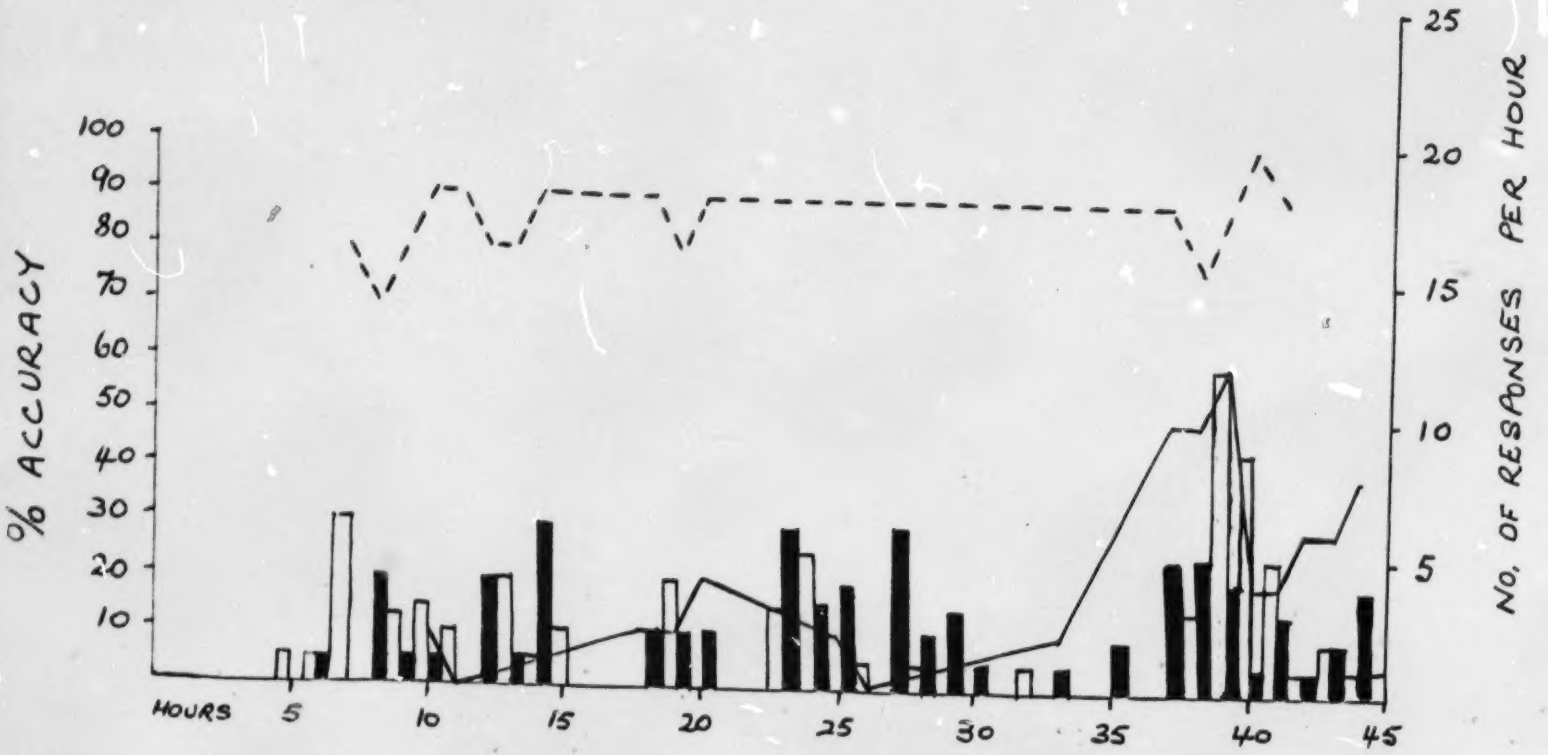

FIGURE 5 : THIRD PERSON S

—— % ACCURATE, SPONTANEOUS ■ NO. SPONTANEOUS

--- % ACCURATE, IMITATION □ NO. IMITATIONS

order studies).[8]

It must also bring into question the ability of error analysts to assign sources to errors. Given in a corpus Juan like whisky, an analyst might wish to explain the error in terms of something like a strategy of simplification on the part of the learner.[9] Yet in Blanca's case, although such a strategy may well be operating, it interacts with another, the strategy of using as large an uninterrupted stretch as possible of what the other person has just said. The error analyst's mistake would have been to attempt to assign a single source to every error, and to attempt to do so without knowing the history of the error. Examples of such mistakes on the part of error analysts, I would suggest, are not unknown.

I turn finally to the definite article. It has often been observed that the speech of learners is in some ways simpler than that of native speakers and is similar to the telegraphic speech of children or to pidgins. It has even been suggested (Schumann (1976)) that pidginisation may characterise all early second language acquisition. Something of this nature can be seen with Blanca. There is the early but intermittent absence of plural marking; there is the more prolonged absence of genitive s and third person s; and there is in addition her performance with the definite article (the meaning in this case: uniquely specified referent). The definite article was used by me and required by her extremely frequently in the games we played in the earlier sessions. Although frequently required, and although no interference would be predicted, it did not appear at all in her spontaneous speech. It was present at first in a number of imitations, then disappeared completely. During this period she was clearly more concerned with making me understand what she wanted than with speaking

correctly, and she did this essentially with content words. This is presumably an example of what has been called a "strategy of simplification", though it might equally be seen as a strategy of communication with simplified language as its outcome. The period during which this occurred was very brief for Blanca. Suddenly the definite article was supplied whenever (or almost whenever) it was required, and thereafter did not fall below criterion. With many other Spanish speaking learners of English, however, this would appear not to be the case. Bertkau (1974) elicited between 9 and 18 English utterances from each of 15 adult Spanish speakers. The article was omitted at least once by 8 of them. It has been suggested by Schumann (1976) that the degree to which the learner's language retains pidgin-like features will be determined largely by his social-psychological distance from the speakers of the target language. Perhaps Blanca's variable performance can be seen as an indication of mixed feelings towards the English.

This study, like all naturalistic longitudinal studies, has many variables and few controls. The features of English which I have looked at here are relatively simple and for the present purpose have been treated as discrete elements. I think, however, that the evidence presented shows that, even where the learner's native language is not used and where incorrect forms are not heard, interference can nevertheless be a real force, and that its effects are felt even when error-free learning appears to have taken place. There is evidence too of the importance of frequency as opposed to "universal strategies" in the order of acquisition of morphemes. There is support for the idea that untutored learners of a second language will, however briefly, pidginise that language in order to communicate in it. Finally, it

would seem that this kind of study, with so much detail, can provide a useful corrective to too hasty interpretation of cross-sectional data. It will be interesting to see what larger scale investigation, particularly of more complex linguistic structures, will bring to light.

[1]This is a revised version of a paper given at the B.A.A.L. meeting at Cardiff in September 1978. I am grateful to my colleagues Ron Brasington, Michael Garman and Paul Fletcher for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

[2]An utterance was considered to be an imitation if Blanca repeated all or part of my immediately preceding utterance without incorporating it into a larger structure.

[3]In order not to lose the benefit of a complete record by breaking it up into samples, the following method, suggested to me by Ron Brasington, is used to show accuracy of responses at various times.

First, relevant responses (i.e. containing the feature under consideration) are listed in order of occurrence and marked as correct (O) or incorrect (X) for that feature.

Response No:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	X	X	X	X	O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O

Percentages are noted for successions of 10 responses:
Correct responses in responses 1-10: 30%
" " " " 2-11: 40%
" " " " 3-12: 50%

These percentages are then assigned to the mid-point of the series of responses to which they refer. Thus: 30%, between responses 5 and 6; 40%, between responses 6 and 7. Figures 1 to 5 in fact show percentage accuracy at points in time.

[4]For example, Dulay and Burt (1974).

[5]But not completely consistent. See, for example, Quirk and Greenbaum (1970).

[6]For a contrary view see Corder (1975).
Some writers (e.g. Dickerson (1975)) attempt to capture the variable nature of learners' language by means of variable rules. The convincing arguments of Matthews (1975) against their use in the description of children's language apply, I believe, with equal force in the case of learners' language.

[7]A distinction is made in, for example, Dulay and Burt (1974) between 'Plural (-s)' (presumably /s/ and /z/) and 'Long plural (-es)'. The fact that we only find 'Possessive ('s)' leaves open the question of whether some cases were in fact /iz/. The greater differences in performance have been between 'Plural (-s)' and 'Possessive ('s)'. Blanca's performance showed no differences between /s/, /z/ and /iz/.

[8]This is a doubt already expressed by Rosansky (1976).

[9]But not every analyst. Teachers of Afrikaans-speaking students insist that such errors appearing in their students' work are attributable entirely to interference. This is a claim difficult to sustain, I should have thought, when students of every linguistic background seem to make the same error.

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